

Idaho's time is now

By Andy Perdue, May 22, 2015

When I began writing my first book nearly 15 years ago, Idaho wine was no more than an afterthought. Today, it is an industry on the verge of something special.

I recall that during the process of pitching my book — a guide to Northwest wineries — to Sasquatch Books in Seattle, my argument for including Idaho was that with fewer than a dozen wineries, there was no harm because it wouldn't take that many more pages.

In the pages of this publication, we've always tried to give Idaho wine its due, at least in proportion to the amount of wine being produced. And the Idaho wine industry, which is filled mostly with kind, bright and earnest people, was more than happy to take any bit of ink we were willing to provide.

Back in 2001, there were about 350 wineries in Washington, Oregon, British Columbia and Idaho. Today, that number has ballooned to somewhere close to 1,800, and the growth has come proportionally from every region.

A decade-and-a-half ago, Idaho's wine industry was dominated by Ste. Chapelle, the state's largest and oldest producer. Beyond that were no more than a few serious producers and just a handful of vineyards.

Idaho's winemaking history goes back to the 1860s, but like so many wine-producing states, the dark curtain of Prohibition took care of the burgeoning industry. However, while many states started up immediately after repeal in 1933 — California and Washington in particular — Idaho was left behind, primarily because of an unofficial temperance movement led by the state's religious conservatives. It wasn't until 1976 when Ste. Chapelle finally brought the words "Idaho" and "wine" together again.

But even then, the Gem State had a tough go of it. In the 1979 film "The Muppet Movie," Steve Martin served a nasty bottle of wine to Kermit and Miss Piggy, which he deemed "one of the finest wines of Idaho." This was Idaho's "Sideways" moment.

It's taken a lot of time and thick skin to overcome such denigration, but Idaho's intrepid winemakers have managed to perch themselves on the precipice of something big. And to accomplish this, they had to remove the name "Idaho" from their wine labels.

One of the seminal moments for Idaho winemakers came in 2007 with the approval of the state's first American Viticultural Area. The federal government granted winemakers the ability to label their wines "Snake River Valley" instead of the state designation. This has made all the difference.

An example: Five or six years ago, I was pouring wines at a fundraiser in Washington, and I had about 50 different wines on the table. One was a Syrah from Sawtooth Winery in Nampa, Idaho. A person came up and asked for a wine, and I said, "How about this delicious Syrah from Idaho?"

She turned up her nose and replied, "Oh, I don't think so!" I poured her a Washington Cab instead.

About a half-hour later, she returned, said she enjoyed the wine I'd selected and wanted another suggestion, to which I replied, "How about this delicious Syrah from the Snake River Valley?"

She was quite excited to try it, and after one taste declared it superb. The power is in the message.

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A few years ago, Moya Dolsby moved from the Washington State Wine Commission to become executive director of the Idaho Wine Commission. When she arrived in Boise, her task was daunting, but now it's gotten much easier because Idaho wine is generating a lot of revenue for the state (not as much as potatoes, mind you). It wasn't so many years ago that we were hard pressed to find many Boise restaurants carrying Idaho wines. Now, most of them do.

Part of this is because of the Snake River Valley AVA on the labels, but a lot of it is the winemaking, which has improved dramatically in the past decade. Greg Koenig has long been a stellar Snake River Valley winemaker. Now he's joined by Melanie Krause (Cinder and Huston), Leslie Preston (Coiled), Meredith Smith (Sawtooth), Martin Fujishin (Fujishin), Earl Sullivan (Telaya), Tim Harless (Hat Ranch), Mike McClure (Indian Creek) and others.

Now, winemaking is becoming even more interesting as intrepid winemakers and grape growers explore Idaho at a more granular level.

Sometime this winter, the federal government is likely to approve Idaho's second and third AVAs. Of particular interest is the Lewis-Clark Valley, an area that surrounds the cities of Lewiston, Idaho, and Clarkston, Wash. Some of the Northwest's most fascinating wines are coming out of this area from such producers as Clearwater Canyon Cellars, Colter's Creek and Basalt Cellars. Only about 100 acres of vines are planted here, but the Lewis-Clark Valley has a rich history of viticulture that goes back to the 1870s, and now is being revived. It also brings the Idaho and Washington wine industries closer together because it will be a bi-state AVA (Washington's 14th federally recognized grape-growing region).

And within the Snake River Valley is the proposed Eagle Foothills AVA, which is just northwest of Boise near the eastern border of the Snake River Valley. At the moment, nine vineyards totaling 70 acres are planted in the Eagle Foothills, with nearly 500 more planned.

If the wines of 3 Horse Ranch Vineyards are any indication, the grapes grown in the Eagle Foothills are pretty special.

These are heady days for the Idaho wine industry. It sits where Washington was in the late 1990s, and it is poised to take advantage of a growing interest in wines from a state best known for other agricultural pursuits. All of this is fun to watch.

